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M'Millan, R.

Public health laws

Kirkby Lonsdale

1897

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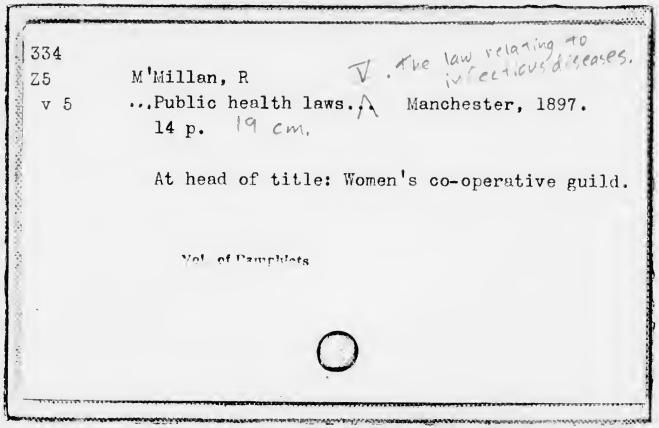

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FILM SIZE: 35mm REDUCTION RATIO: 10:1 IMAGE PLACEMENT: IA (IIA) IB IIB

DATE FILMED: 4-2-98 INITIALS: KCT

TRACKING # : 32599

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No 1

Women's Co-operative Guild.

PUBLIC HEALTH LAWS.

V.

THE LAW RELATING TO INFECTIOUS DISEASES

By R. M'MILLAN

(Associate of the Sanitary Institute and Lecturer to the Ladies' Sanitary Association, London).

PRICE ONE PENNY.

To be obtained from the General Secretary, Miss LLEWELYN DAVIES Kirkby Lonsdale.

1897.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES.

"Let our hearts be bowed as the heart of one man, to say that, so far as we have the power, so help us God, no man, woman, or child in Britain, be he prince or be he beggar, shall die henceforth of preventible disease. . . . Let us repent of and amend that scandalous neglect of the well-known laws of health and cleanliness which destroys thousands of lives yearly in this kingdom without need or reason, in defiance alike of science, of humanity, and of our Christian profession. Two hundred thousand persons, I am told, have died of preventible fever since the Prince Consort's death a few years ago. Is not that a national sin to bow our hearts as the heart of one man?"—*Charles Kingsley.*

IT is only since the year 1838 that we have known that our bodies are entirely formed of and built up by microscopic animal organisms, resembling, as we examine them under the microscope, colourless specks of jelly. There are millions of these "cells," as they are called, in the human body, and just as they have or have not all that they require in the way of oxygen gas and nourishment from the blood, so is the health—the ease or *dis*ease—of that body. "Ye are living temples," St. Paul said ages ago, and science adds new meaning to his words.

Each cell has a life of its own. Some live from twelve to twenty-four hours, as is likely the case with many of the cells lining the digestive system; others may live for many years, as in gristle and bone.

Now, as the cells are animal organisms, closely resem-

bling the lowest form of animal life of which we know, their first requisite is oxygen gas from the air. This they get in more or less abundance from the blood, where it is carried by the red cells or corpuscles, sometimes called oxygen-carriers. If the person breathes in an impure atmosphere, there will be a poor supply of oxygen to the blood, and the cells of the body will languish—just as a candle or fire does when oxygen gas is deficient in the air around. "'Tis life of which our veins are scant," and this "life," this oxygen gas, we need re-supplied to us every moment, day *and night*. We could only live—at least our bodies could only live—for a few minutes without air, but sometimes they languish on for years, owing to being insufficiently supplied with it.

DISEASES CAUSED BY GERMS.

The date at which we learnt that many diseases were caused by microscopic germs of vegetable life was even later than 1838. Every one knows now that germs cause such diseases as consumption, diphtheria, and typhoid fever. These germs, bacteria, or microbes—as they are variously called—are very low and microscopic forms of vegetable origin. They flourish and multiply exceedingly wherever there is dampness, darkness, and dust.

HOW TO DESTROY GERMS.

Rays of light and of sunshine destroy those terrible and unseen enemies, and where there is perfect cleanliness they cannot live. Do not fear, therefore, to let the sun's rays enter into all the rooms, even to the spoiling

of the carpets—"Where the sun never comes the doctor does"—and understand the reason why it is that in hospitals the nurses scrupulously dust the already apparently quite clean wards three times a day. See what space they allow for each bed, and how little furniture and drapery they permit to take up the room of the air which is so necessary. Carpets and curtains collect dust, and dust harbours germs. Germs may enter into the body from the air, the ground, water, food, clothing, walls, or furniture, so that it has been said that the five pillars of health are clean air, clean water, clean food, clean persons, and clean surroundings. By surroundings is meant our homes, and the streets or roads in which they are. Winds and rain out of doors purify the air. Indoors we must *imitate* the action of the winds. Once every day we should let the wind sweep through each room, entirely changing the air of it. But always there should be a gentle movement of fresh air being drawn in and stale air out of the room. We ought really to have a ventilator of some kind in every room, but until houses are so constructed we must continue to let air be always entering by the window and leaving by the chimney, which is always very useful as an outlet for air. If there is sufficient air space—prisoners are allowed 600 or 800 cubic feet per head—no poisonous vapours or gas rising from polluted ground, and the walls and furniture are clean, such ventilation, with light and sunshine, should keep the air free from germs.[1]

[1] The cubic contents of a room may be got by multiplying the length by the breadth, and the result by the height. We must always remember that furniture, curtains, and carpets take up air

Germs in water or milk—which they are very liable to attack—may be best destroyed by boiling for ten minutes, germs in meat by cooking till brown and keeping in a cupboard or larder, always above ground and well ventilated by a through draught, no ashpits or other sources of polluted air near.

THE ACTION OF GERMS.

Germs having entered the body, immediately attack the cells. If the cells are strong and vigorous they quickly flow round the invading microbe and make an end of it. But should the cell be in no condition to overcome the enemy—being, say, insufficiently supplied with oxygen and other nourishment—it succumbs before the invader, who takes up his position in the body of the cell and proceeds to split up or bud into two, into four, and so on, till an exceeding great number is formed, and the particular disease which the invading microbe is fitted to set up declares itself, more or less severely, in a time varying from two or three days to two or three weeks. Sometimes so lightly that a person suffering from typhoid or scarlet fever may be able all the time to go about their work spreading the disease. A man told me recently how he and his wife had had scarlet fever, but never stayed at home or ceased their work. The many people who caught the infection are not likely to have had it so lightly; and of course these poor people knew nothing of the serious risk to their future health involved in taking

space, and harbour dust. Also that a slight escape of coal gas from a leaking gas pipe is a great danger to health, and quite capable of causing diphtheria, for instance.

no precautions to guard against the probable after-effects of the fever upon their constitutions.

And here I would like to say that it is not only the alarming infectious diseases that are spread by dirt and microbes. Headache, and low health generally, with indigestion and diarrhæa, are mostly due to these causes —or to the first, since the second is a result of the first. Enlarged tonsils in children also often result from, and are always increased by, the breathing of impure —dust or smell laden—air. Smells always warn us of dangers to health.

Infectious diseases are fatal to children in proportion to their youth. More children die of measles and whooping cough every year in England than of several other of the infectious fevers and smallpox taken together. The Greeks were so ashamed of a child's death that the funeral always took place at night. It is a pity that English mothers do not feel a proper shame for the frequent illnesses and deaths of their children. A child should never be ill, and should always be most carefully guarded from infection. We should never allow *any* symptoms of illness in a child to pass unheeded, and we can never send for the doctor *too soon*.

HEALTH LAWS.

Successive visitations of cholera in the early years of the century taught the Government of this country the need for health legislation—that is, of laws relating to the Public Health, with which may also be classed the Factory and Workshops Acts. The first Public Health

Act for the whole of England was passed in the year 1848. The second, in 1875, mapped the country out, into Urban, Rural, and Port Sanitary Districts, and made the appointment of Medical Officers of Health for them compulsory. It had the effect, in a very few years, of reducing the death-rate from 22 to 17 per 1,000 persons living, besides raising the standard of health generally. We are still mostly governed by this excellent Act, as well as by many other Public Health and Factory and Workshops Acts passed since then. If these Acts were perfectly administered there would practically be no infectious disease, no insanitary house, no polluted water supply, no nuisance from smells or decaying refuse, no dust heaps, no nuisance from offensive trades, and no unsound food sold in England. Happily, the spread of education, owing to the Education Act of 1870, is giving rise to a popular demand for the proper enforcement of these laws.

Surely every woman and every girl, before starting in life, needs a course of instruction in Hygiene and Sanitary Law. For in the hands of women the health—which is the wealth—of the country must ever remain.

DISINFECTION UNDER THE PUBLIC HEALTH ACT, 1875.

The Public Health Act of 1875 provides for the cleansing and disinfecting, by the local authority, of infected premises, for disinfecting clothing, bedding, &c., free of charge. The local authority may destroy infected clothing and compensate, and may remove to hospital an infected person without proper lodging accommodation.

The Act makes it an offence to expose oneself in any public place while suffering from an infectious illness—my scarlet fever friend and his wife could have been fined £5 each for mixing freely with other people—being in charge of a sufferer so exposed, giving or lending infected articles (sending infected linen to be washed, for instance, without notifying the fact); any driver of a public conveyance who does not immediately have it disinfected after a person suffering from such disease has (to his knowledge) been conveyed in it; and lastly, any person who lets an infected room or house before it has been disinfected, or who shows for hire any house infected within six weeks, and when questioned on the subject makes a false statement.

All these are illegal acts, and any person guilty of any one of them renders himself or herself liable to be prosecuted and fined.

In the event of threatened Epidemic Disease, the Local Government Board has power to make regulations—as, for example, for house-to-house visitation, for the provision of medical aid and accommodation, for cleaning and ventilating in order to guard against the spread of disease. Section 27 of the Amending Act of 1890 makes provision for keeping common courts and passages clean.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES.

Infectious diseases in Public Health Law are :—

Smallpox.
Cholera.
Diphtheria, or membraneous croup.

Erysipelas.

Scarletina or scarlet fever (one and the same disease).

And the fevers known by any of the following names :—

Typhus (a disease which has practically disappeared owing to better sanitary conditions now than formerly).

Typhoid (sometimes called enteric, or continued).

Relapsing (or famine fever).

Puerperal fever.

Also any diseases the sanitary authority for the district may wish to include. Some sanitary authorities, for instance, include measles ; and some medical men desire to include consumption and influenza.

NOTIFICATION AND PREVENTION ACTS.

Bolton was the first town to promote notification. The Infectious Diseases (Notification) Act was passed in 1889, and the Infectious Diseases (Prevention) Act in 1890. These Acts cost 1½d. each, and may be had, as others, from Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode, either directly or through any bookseller. They are Adoptive Acts—that is, they may or may not be adopted as law by any sanitary authority. But they ought really to be in force everywhere, as perhaps they mostly are.

Notification of infectious illness to the Medical Officer of Health enables him to take every precaution against the spread of the disease, and to investigate its origin. The Act of 1889 requires: "When an inmate of any building used for human habitation within a district to

which this Act extends is suffering from an infectious disease to which this Act applies, then, unless such building is a hospital in which persons suffering from an infectious disease are received, the following provisions shall have effect, that is to say: (*a*) The head of the family to which such inmate (in this Act referred to as the patient) belongs, and in his default the nearest relatives of the patient present in the building or being in attendance on the patient, and in default of such relatives every person in charge of or in attendance on the patient, and in default of any such person the occupier of the building, shall, as soon as he becomes aware that the patient is suffering from an infectious disease to which this Act applies, send notice thereof to the Medical Officer of Health of the district." Section 13 declares that "The provisions of this Act shall apply to every ship, vessel, boat, tent, van, shed, or similar structure used for human habitation."

The Infectious Diseases Prevention Act provides for the inspection of dairies, and gives power to prohibit the supply of infected milk. Section 8 prohibits the retention of dead bodies in certain cases ; and Section 9 requires bodies of persons dying of infectious disease in hospital to be removed only for burial. Infectious rubbish, such as poultices, &c., thrown into ashpits, is made an offence ; and the local authority shall from time to time provide, free of charge, temporary shelter or house accommodation, with any necessary attendants, for the members of any family in which any infectious disease has appeared, who have been compelled to leave

their dwellings for the purpose of enabling such dwellings to be disinfected by the local authority.

THE LAW FOR LONDON.

London is governed by a Public Health Act of its own, passed in 1891. The provisions generally, as well as those relating to notification and prevention of infectious diseases, are more stringent than in the Act of 1875, with its Amending Act of 1890. A person who knows himself to be suffering from infectious disease shall not milk any animal or pick fruit, and shall not engage in any occupation connected with food, or carry on any trade or business in such a manner as to be likely to spread the infectious disease, and if he does so he shall be liable to a fine not exceeding ten pounds.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES HOSPITALS.

In all cases where the arrangements of the household do not permit of the complete separation of the patient suffering from infectious disease from the rest of the family, it is best, if possible, to have the patient removed to hospital at the earliest possible moment. The medical practitioner in attendance upon the case will arrange this by giving a certificate, which has to be sent to the Medical Officer of Health. A copy of the certificate should be retained at the house of the patient, in order that it may be given to the nurse who accompanies the ambulance. Happily, the prejudice against Infectious Diseases Hospitals is breaking down—has completely broken down in London, where the applications for

admission to the hospitals of the Local Government Board are often more than can be accommodated—the excellent care of the patients, both during transport and in hospital, becoming widely known and much appreciated.

CO-OPERATION.

Our Public Health Laws are the best in the world, but the difficulty of properly carrying out the laws is great. Let us women co-operate to carry them out. Let us desire and procure, for our girls especially, a sound and practical education in the Laws of Health, and then, thoroughly understanding the benefits of well lighted and ventilated rooms, sufficiently spacious, thoroughly clean and free from damp, we can aid our Sanitary Inspectors, Medical Officers, and the Government of our country in preserving a high standard of health, and in eliminating preventible disease, "Health is the Capital" of the working man or woman.

THE following pamphlets on Public Health can be obtained from the General Secretary, Miss Llewelyn Davies, Kirkby Lonsdale, price 1d. each :—

THE HEALTH OF THE COMMUNITY : HOW TO PROMOTE IT. By Miss ALICE RAVENHILL.

THE LAW RELATING TO NUISANCES. By Miss BOMPAS.

THE PREVENTION OF SMOKE. By Miss HARRIS.

THE HOUSING OF THE PEOPLE. By Mrs. PHILLIMORE.

FACTORIES AND WORKSHOPS. By Mrs. VAUGHAN NASH.

DRAINS AND DUSTBINS. By Miss M'MILLAN

Printed by the Co-operative Newspaper Society Limited, Manchester.

MFH 32599

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